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A preferred vision for leading elementary and secondary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for leading elementary and secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

I believe our education system is vital to our nation and to our way of life. We need educational leaders who are committed to our students and willing to become masters of each of the critical elements associated with exemplary principals. The six Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL) define what the exemplary school principal should know, be like and do to create productive schools where all children are learning.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING
ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
and Postsecondary Education
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Arts in Education

by
Melissa D. Hasty

May 2004

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This Research Paper by: Melissa D. Hasty

Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING
ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY SCHOOLS
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

3/1/04

Date Approved

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3/8/04

Date Approved

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3-10-04

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I believe "School leaders of the 21st century need at least the following three attributes. They must care deeply for others, create shared visions to motivate and inspire the community and have a tenacious will to continue when personal failures occur" (Hoyle, 2001, p. 5). Education has changed a great deal since I was in the K-12 school setting almost twenty years ago. Educators today do much more than simply teach the three R's of reading, writing, and arithmetic.

In many cases, the school faculty and staff are the only positive role models in the child's life. Many schools provide additional services such as character education programs, after school programs for latch key children, and incentives and classes for parents with the hope of developing positive parenting skills and increasing parental involvement with the children. The school and community, with the leadership of an innovative administrator, have to be tenacious in order to help students become successful learners and develop into productive citizens.

As we strive to meet the needs of our globally competitive society, I believe the successful educational leader has to demonstrate an understanding of his/her personal and professional growth, progress, commitment, and vision for serving a school as an education leader. The University of Northern Iowa's Educational Leadership program has prepared me to effectively lead a school by reflecting upon the knowledge and experiences required of an exemplary educational leader in six critical areas or elements known as the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL).

The Iowa Department of Education (DE) collaboratively developed with numerous partners the ISSL in 2000. The Iowa Board of Examiners adopted the ISSL

standards to license principals in Iowa in 2000. The DE categorized the essential qualities necessary for educational leaders to possess within six critical elements which are: visionary leadership, instructional leadership, organizational leadership, collaborative leadership, ethical leadership, and political leadership. The DE provided information pertaining to the knowledge, dispositions, and performances that an exemplary educational leader must possess in order to effectively lead an educational institution within the six ISSL standards. Leaders do not use the standards in isolation. Rather, they are implemented simultaneously.

I believe our education system is vital to our nation and to our way of life. We need educational leaders who are committed to our students and willing to become masters of each of the critical elements associated with exemplary principals. The six Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL) define what the exemplary school principal should know, be like and do to create productive schools where all children are learning.

Philosophy

“The principal becomes a nurturer of the entire school community; the shepherd of the flock, the person who provides the sustaining lifeblood and passion to the school” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 34). I became an educator so I could work with children and make an impact on them and my community. Gandhi said, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world” (Lumley, 2001, p. 9). Sometimes, when things get hectic, I wonder if I would have gone into teaching if I had known the awesome responsibility those words would bestow upon me, but my resounding answer continues to be that education is the only profession for me. Although an exorbitant amount of pressure has been placed on

educators since the development of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, I cannot imagine a career outside of education.

In order to meet the federal requirements, "Support and involvement from all of America is necessary to restructure inner-city schools and neighborhoods" (Cartwright & D'Orso, 1993, p. 6). I believe it is important for all stakeholders to believe in the mission and vision of the school and play an active role in its development. I believe it is the job of educational administrators to keep the mission and vision in mind while analyzing and assessing student needs, setting goals for educational growth, and providing teachers with the tools necessary to accomplish the goal.

As educators, we mold the future as we deal with all students on a daily basis. "You cannot just advocate for the easy to teach, the likeable, or the college-bound. You must be the face and the voice for all students regardless of their circumstances" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 96). As a former alternative school teacher and facilitator, I realize just how much I have to be an advocate for students. I care, accept, and encourage all students to succeed at whatever makes them happy. I believe educators hold the key to the future, if we can provide students with the support, knowledge, abilities, and ideas that will open the doors to their futures. An awesome job has been bestowed upon us; a job that has rewards beyond all comprehension.

I entered the educational leadership program because I believe that I can impact more students in a leadership role. I will impact students by hiring a highly competent and energetic staff that is willing to work together for the betterment of the children, by providing professional development for the teachers that is usable and research based,

and by maintaining an environment that is safe and students know people care about them.

Visionary Leadership

A visionary leader is defined as, “A school administrator who is an educational leader that promotes the successes of all students facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community” (ISSL Standard #1, 2000). I believe, “The best visions have the power to move people emotionally and cognitively. They act as a filter for every decision made, from the classroom to the boardroom. These are the visions that emerge from a process involving key stakeholders who are given time to dream, explore, think creatively about what is possible within a school or district, rather than just what is probable” (Conzemius & O’Neill, 2001, p. 27). I believe visionary leadership is the driving force behind the work of the education leader.

While working in Manson, Iowa, and Waterloo, Iowa, I had opportunities to develop the school’s mission and vision statements. The most worthwhile experiences were derived from shared site based decision making where the administrators valued the thoughts and contributions of the faculty and staff. Actively participating in these processes has given me the skills and abilities necessary to effectively lead faculty and staff through the process of developing mission and vision statements.

I truly believe exemplary visionary leaders empower all of the stakeholders, teachers, parents, and community to work collaboratively to meet the educational performance goals set for the students. I believe visionary leaders

who are caring, focused on student performance, and determined to succeed, despite negative influences and setbacks. “In short, a shared, unwavering commitment to the clear vision and goal of improving student results is a key difference between schools that are succeeding and those that are failing or are simply mediocre” (Conzemius & O’Neill, 2001, p. 14)

I had the opportunity to interview Dr. Arlis Swartzendruber, Superintendent of the Waterloo Community Schools, Waterloo, Iowa, on October 10, 2001. He spoke to us about his vision of eliminating departmentalized school buildings. Dr. Swartzendruber described schools set up with teams of teachers that learn and work together. “A professional learning community which is one whose professional staff meets regularly and frequently to reflect on and inquire into its practices, and to learn together and take action on their learning for the benefit of students” (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 197). “Five dimensions of these professional learning communities are as follows: (1) shared values and vision (2) collective learning and application (3) supportive shared leadership (4) supportive conditions; and (5) shared personal practice” (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 197).

The school teams Dr. Swartzendruber described consisted of one teacher from each curricular area; English, math, science, and social studies. The teams are located in one area or hallway of the school and are assigned the same team of students. Students would stay within the team’s area of the building versus moving all over the building to receive their education. The benefits to setting a building up in teams are tremendous.

Teachers build stronger relationships with their students because they have fewer students, teaming allows for a more “family-like” atmosphere within the school, and teachers view their team as a support system when dealing with challenging students.

At Central Middle School in Waterloo, Iowa, the staff teaches on teams like those proposed by Dr. Swartzendruber. The teams are not departmentalized at all. Actually, it is a rare occasion when teachers teaching the same subject get the opportunity to talk with each other. Although the building is not architecturally designed for teaming, staff members are organized on teams. The disadvantage of working in a building that has not been architecturally designed to facilitate this teaming approach is that science teachers do not always get to teach in a science laboratory. Furthermore, teachers of other curricular areas have to teach in rooms that were originally designed to be science laboratories. Not having the resources one is afforded in a science laboratory poses some problems for science teachers. Teaching within a former science laboratory proves to be challenging for a non-science teachers as there are unnecessary obstacles to maneuver around.

I am a very visionary leader. I plan to lead the entire faculty and staff through the process of writing meaningful mission and vision statements. Once the shared mission and vision statements are in place, I will make data driven decisions that will help us reach those vision and mission statements. Clear vision and mission statements will help us to maintain our focus on what is best for the students and our community.

I believe visionary leadership is an essential driving force behind educational leadership. A vision is the direction in which we are leading our work. The staff in

Waterloo have experienced first-hand the benefits of Dr. Swartzendruber's vision and have witnessed his struggles to get the entire faculty to believe in such an innovative vision for teaching students. Visionary leadership is not always easy, but it is absolutely essential.

Instructional Leadership

An instructional leader is defined as, "A school administrator who is an educational leader that promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth" (ISSL Standard #2, 2000). Instructional leaders must establish clear mission and vision statements, analyze student test data, collectively set goals with staff based on student academic need areas, provide teachers with the professional development necessary to meet those goals, and "develop a deep and broad knowledge base with respect to curriculum" (Glatthorn, 2000, p. 3).

While analyzing test data, assessing the needs of the students, and setting goals are important roles of instructional leaders, the school also needs a staff that is willing to change and try new things if assessment data shows there is an area of concern. If the staff is not open-minded, the professional development provided by the district may not be effective. "Classroom teachers will sometimes reject such instructors because, 'You don't know what it is like in the trenches'." (McKenzie, 1991, p. 7).

During our weekly professional development time in October 2001, my team of teachers was asked to develop a presentation regarding block scheduling for the faculty at

Central Middle School in Waterloo. We were asked to create a Power Point presentation that discussed the advantages and disadvantages of block scheduling. The majority of the staff was receptive to our presentation, but others were quite resistant to change. I have come to realize that not all educators are open minded and willing to try new things. Despite the vision that has been created by the majority of the stakeholders, not everyone will agree and be willing to support the process.

Should a few negative people be allowed to stop progress? Susan Meehan, a second year principal from Dubuque, Iowa, shared some of her insight when dealing with difficult staff. She noted that administrators have to build a backbone, gather advice and information from a variety of sources, and make decisions based on their belief of what is best for kids. If administrators make decisions based on what is best for students, they can rest assured the decision was a good one. Mrs. Meehan added, "When dealing with the "poops" on staff that want to cause problems we must "flush them away" and move on with our work for the betterment of the kids" (S. Meehan, personal communication, June 11, 2003). This description, although quite vivid, is absolutely accurate and necessary.

I believe providing teachers with the tools they need does not simply mean providing more equipment. Important professional development will focus on curricular opportunities and teaching strategies, not just equipment. In some cases, we have mountains of equipment that accomplishes very little because the staff does not know how to use it effectively within the time restraints of covering the required outcomes and components of their curriculum.

I also realize how important it is for instructional leaders to be able to get along with a variety of personality types. “Few leaders fail because they are unable to cope with things. When leaders blunder, it usually is because they have dealt ineffectively with people” (Combs, Miser, & Whitaker, 1999, p. 7). Although a number of teachers may not be willing to support portions of a vision, this does not mean that there needs to be conflict. If educational leaders provide professional development in a non-confrontational manner and try to present both sides of an issue, it facilitates discussion of the issue without cramming unwanted information down the throats of those who do not want to hear about it.

Instruction is the business we are in and I will be a strong instructional leader who supports the faculty so they can accomplish the school’s learning goals for students. I will do everything in my power to provide the faculty with the tools they need to do their job. I will acknowledge the work of faculty and celebrate our successes. I will encourage all to take risks for the betterment of our school and student body. I will also ensure that all of the physical needs relative to the building are addressed in a timely manner.

Organizational Leadership

An organizational leader is defined as, “An educational leader that promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment” (ISSL Standard #3, 2000).

I personally believe that all leaders must be organized. How can anyone lead an organization without being highly organized? There are two areas of organizational leadership that teachers deem important: organizational development and the organizational environment. Organizational development is the ability of principals to work with co-workers and community members to promote positive growth and change within the school. Organizational environment refers to the day-to-day ability of principal to nurture the relationship of all members of the organization as well as establish and maintain the daily operational procedures for the school (Williams, H. S., 2000, p.4).

I had the terrific opportunity to job shadow Marla Padget, Assistant Principal at Central Middle School in Waterloo, Iowa, on a daily basis. Many of the days in the office were incredibly busy. Mrs. Padget's duties include, but are not limited to, setting up a master schedule of classes to be taught, scheduling all students for those classes, disciplining students who do not follow classroom or school policies, organizing all of the athletic events, fielding calls from parents and community members, supervising lunch shifts so teachers can have their required break, conducting walk-through evaluations of one-third of all classrooms each day, conducting annual evaluations of teachers, providing feedback to those teachers she had the opportunity to visit in their classrooms, attending administrative meetings at the building and district level, and providing input at daily team meetings for the seventh grade teams she supervises. Marla has to be incredibly flexible in her daily routine, but she must also be incredibly organized to adequately perform her job responsibilities.

Since graduating from college, I have carried a daily planner to keep me organized. I really enjoyed one of our practicum assignments which required us to create a principal's calendar for one year. I had time to reflect on the daily, weekly, and monthly job responsibilities of the principalship. The principalship is an arduous task, and it almost seems impossible to think that one or two people can do all of the work necessary to efficiently operate a school. I thrive and function when I am organized and when people around me believe I am organized. I will do what is necessary to ensure my building runs smoothly.

Collaborative Leadership

A collaborative leader is defined as, "An educational leader that promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources" (ISSL Standard #4, 2000). The signs of effective collaboration are, "A broad spectrum of people and organizations share a common vision; their commitment is not short-term; self interest, while not absent, does not dominate what is being done; and things change for the better" (Levine, 1998, p. 1). While all of the components that Levine mentioned must be present, I also believe that there are other elements that must be understood for true collaboration to be realized.

I believe collaboration is a process, rather than a program where ownership for the process and its outcomes are shared.

Collaboration doesn't just mean staff members feeling good about each other or liking each other. It is creating an environment – through structures, systems,

processes, and policies – where everyone contributes skills, knowledge, and experience to continuously improve student learning. Collaboration also extends beyond the school's walls to everyone who can contribute to the schools success. It involves multiple stakeholders: teachers, support staff, administrators, parents, students, and community members (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001, p. 16).

Schools must be viewed as key partners, rather than recipients of collaboration, and school personnel at all levels must be engaged in the partnership. Collaboration is comprehensive and should reach out to all stakeholders. "As you reach out to divergent groups and issues within our communities, one of the first things we must do is to learn to "seek first to understand" other people's interests, needs, and perspectives" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 67). True collaboration also takes a great deal of time and effort because planning is essential.

One example of collaboration that is present within the Waterloo Community School District is the Communities in Schools partnership (CIS). CIS is a collaborative effort involving the county health department and twenty-three agencies working together to provide health services to students. This collaboration has resulted in increases in school attendance and grade point averages of students who use the health clinics located within the school buildings. Waterloo's CIS collaboration is a perfect example of collaboration.

Our goal is to provide whatever support is necessary to encourage our teachers and staff to set high personal and professional goals and then to do whatever is necessary to reach them. For you see, when one of us succeeds, we all succeed.

We are a team. We are a family. Together we are powerful. Alone we are small.

Together we can change the world (Wilmore, 2002, p. 40).

The O'Neill Public School District's after school and summer programs are other prime examples of collaboration at its finest. The school received a Twenty First Century Grant in 2003 that funds an after school and summer program for students who are considered latch-key kids. The program is a huge collaboration between numerous community organizations and the school: the hospital, police department, and Department of Health and Human Services are just a few of the partners of the collaboration. These community organizations provide mini-courses, presentations, and field trips to kids with the hope of improving their lives, while providing a safe environment for the kids to play when their parents are unable to care for them. The program has been so successful that it has grown to serve approximately seventy students with others on a waiting list.

My primary focus during my first year as a principal will be to develop and maintain numerous relationships and collaborations. I plan to be involved with the PTO/Booster Club, local civic organizations, and church. I will also work closely with local business people to generate their support for our programs and solicit their expertise as guest speakers within the building. Our collaboration will benefit the local businesses and community by providing a skilled workforce comprised of taxpaying citizens.

"People respond best to an open collaborative environment where communication is the rule rather than the exception" (Williams, B., 1993, p. 6). I believe collaborative leadership will be the most difficult for me to accomplish. Time plays a major factor in developing long-term sustainable collaborations. I have seen through my experiences as

an administrator designee, time is of the essence when you are trying to do all of the daily activities that an administrator must accomplish. I will definitely make a concerted effort to develop and maintain this process.

Ethical Leadership

An ethical leader is defined as, “An educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner” (ISSL Standard #5, 2000). I believe,

Stakeholders need to know that you are a principal with character, that you value and honor, and that you are driven by an unending passion to do everything you can to promote the success of all students, faculty, and staff members, families – of the entire learning community – to reach a vision of excellence (Wilmore, 2002, p. 81).

Through thoughtful research, I have come to the conclusion that there are two important decision-making approaches: care and justice. The care approach focuses on listening to someone’s perspective, responding to their perspective, and remaining in the relationship after sharing your perspective. The justice approach focuses on establishing the facts of a situation and removing yourself from knowing the individual (Denig & Quinn, 2001, p. 2).

The two approaches are complementary of each other and it is the individual administrator’s choice as to which approach to use in each particular situation. A dynamic administrator once told me, “We need to let the written policies handle the

tough decisions and not let our personal opinions or feelings about the individuals get involved in the decision-making process. If we do that, we will never set ourselves up for problems or grievances” (W.R. Richardson, personal communication, October 15, 1995). His personal advice has always worked well for me and it has been one of the best pieces of information I have ever received as an educator.

While working as an administrator designee at Central Middle School in Waterloo and as the facilitator of Manson Northwest Webster’s Twin Lakes Learning Center in Manson, Iowa, I made numerous decisions that were based on school or building policies. Although these decisions were the easiest to make, I have also had to make numerous decisions on issues for which no school or building policies were in place. These decisions take a lot of reflection and are the most difficult to administer. I am a very ethical person and will be an ethical leader who bases decisions upon policy and procedure, whenever possible. When situations arise that do not fit perfectly into this mold, I will base my decisions on what is best for the kids.

“When people in the community see you, they see your school. Everything you say or do reflects back on the school you represent” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 70). Ethical leadership is vital if administrators are going to lead a building effectively. Educational leaders must make decisions carefully and follow school policy. I will continue to make decisions based on what I believe is best for kids and school policy.

Political Leadership

A political leader is defined as, “An educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political,

social, economic, legal, and cultural context” (ISSL Standard #6, 2000). “Politics is a process through which individuals and groups openly express needs and interests and reconcile differences. Individuals and constituency groups can reconcile divergent differences through consultation and negotiation” (Keedy & Bjork, 2001, p. 2).

There are three different types of politics within schools and they are identified as participatory politics, patronage politics, and partisan politics. Participatory politics is when participation by groups is frequent, complex, and lots of interaction among interested individuals occurs. Partisan politics is defined as groups or individuals who compete over educational issues. Patronage politics occurs when jobs, funds, or programs are given or withheld based on a person’s affiliations (Keedy & Bjork, 2001, p. 2).

Effective leadership attempts to bypass political problems by setting a clear vision, rallying stakeholders, and finding a balance between listening to other opinions and asserting one’s own convictions in the decision-making process. I believe to be effective leaders we need to use common sense, be flexible, control our emotions, be able to think through decisions, and derive decisions based on fairness, policy, and what is best educationally for the students.

There are going to be people who have agendas that may or may not align with the school’s vision. There will be times when there isn’t enough money to fund everyone’s program. Administrators need to determine which program meets the shared vision and has the greatest positive impact on students and be prepared to handle any

political repercussions. I will lead by basing my decisions on what is best for the kids not on political interests.

My Vision for Leading the School

My vision is to motivate all stakeholders with a shared mission and vision, make sure all who enter the building know that they are competent and necessary components of the school, while insuring that all decisions are made with the best educational interest of the students in mind. I believe it is the job of the administrator to gather input from the entire staff for the development of the mission and vision. When the mission and vision are in place, it is the role of the administrator to motivate stakeholders to work toward that mission and vision. "What happens at the building level is paramount since this is where plans must be translated into the actions that directly affect students" (Castallo, 2001, p. 56).

I will empower all faculty and staff. I truly believe that all faculty and staff must feel like they are an integral part of the school and our successes are attributed to them. I plan to support my staff by being visible as much as possible, through attendance at their team meetings, visiting their classrooms, and surveying them to obtain feedback regarding areas for improvement. I believe teachers need to feel supported, empowered, and encouraged, in order to be highly effective.

We must remain focused on what is best educationally for all students. Our decisions must be based on true and tested policies that are fair and consistent. We must put ourselves in the position of parents and students when we make decisions and ask ourselves how we would like to be treated if we were in their position. Parents send their

student to schools trusting the professional to provide them with the academic skills necessary to lead productive and successful lives. This is our job and we can do it effectively and efficiently.

I truly look forward to securing an administrative position. I believe it is my niche in life that will enable me to have the greatest positive impact on students. I had the opportunity to work with numerous exemplary administrators, and professors, and reflect on the good and the bad of educational leadership. I believe exemplary educational leaders exhibit all six of the ISSL standards of visionary, instructional, organizational, collaborative, ethical, and political leadership effectively. My Masters of Arts in Education preparation has ensured that I have the skills and demeanor necessary to effectively fulfill the duties related to a position in educational leadership.

Conclusion

Students are our future and the success of our way of life depends on giving our students the experiences that will be necessary for them to cope and succeed in this ever-changing society. "The role of the principal has transitioned from school manager to the school catalyst for success for all stakeholders" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 5). As the school catalyst, we must be political, ethical, collaborative, organizational, instructional, and visionary educational leaders.

We must rally all stakeholders around a shared vision for the school and empower all who enter to assist with the education of our students. "Everyone contributes ideas for change, and everyone contributes to the interventions needed for high quality implementation. Developing shared vision, planning and providing resources, investing

in professional learning, and checking on progress and providing continuous assistance” (Wilmore, 2002, p. 5).

The six ISSL standards of educational leadership demonstrate exemplary leadership skills and have molded my beliefs, while enlightening me with the necessary skills to be an effective leader in education. The University of Northern Iowa’s educational leadership preparation program, with its rigorous coursework, has effectively prepared me to take on the challenges that face me in any educational administration position. I look forward to the challenges with the hope of improving education for the students within the community I live and the building that I will lead.

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